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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives**

## Statement submitted by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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## Statement*

1. In many cultures of the world, women and girls are holders of the sacred, transmitters of culture, protectors of tradition, and caretakers of others. Women are central to the care and progress of the family and have increasingly become part of the global workforce. In recent decades, equality between women and men, and increasing women's access to public services, have become important topics of formal and informal discussions among politicians, media, communities and families. Governments are deliberating about the legal and economic requirements to support programmes that will provide women and girls full access to education, skill development training, and technology enabling them to participate in full employment and decent work.

2. "Decent work" sums up the aspirations of many people for their working lives. Decent work allows people to engage in employment that is productive and delivers a fair income, in a secure and supportive work environment. Decent work also provides social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, and the encouragement for people to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. For women particularly, decent work offers them the occasion to receive fair and equal treatment and opportunities for growth and advancement. However, women continue to be overrepresented in precarious, low-skilled, low-paid jobs with little prospect for advancement. Women constitute approximately 40 per cent of total world employment yet they earn far less than their male counterparts for the same jobs. Women are also more likely than men to be unemployed, poor, be subject to violence, discrimination, and harassment within their communities and workplaces.

3. It is clear that the greater the demand for equality between women and men so is the need for women to have access to education, skills, support and training. The enormous challenges facing women in particular and society in general means that women and men must both be equally involved in and committed to finding a solution to this problem. For this to be realized there must be common terrain for action that builds skills, alliances, and respect between all people, while unitarily working towards the full realization of women's rights and access to services and decent work.

4. In many developing countries, young girls are expected to look after the home as well as their younger siblings and other children. In such environments they often have limited access to education and are regularly subjected to acts of violence. On this basis women and girls often perceive themselves as being worth less than male members of their family and community. This attitude is upheld as they become adults and start families of their own. This value of being "less than" is subsequently passed on to their children, continuing negative and destructive belief systems and patterns of behaviours.

5. One example of this is from a small mining town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo girls as young as 6 years of age work alongside their mothers in perilous conditions, collecting and washing minerals, and selling them to mining companies. The young girls become mothers and then, having been exposed to no other options, expect the same of their

* Issued without formal editing.

daughters. The girl children work six to seven days a week, do not attend school, live in dire levels of economic poverty, and are repeatedly subjected to physical and sexual violence. These young girls are not given the opportunity to play freely and happily.

6. In recent years, the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and international NGOs have intervened, creating programmes that take girls out of their low-paid dangerous mining jobs. The girls are sent to schools that educate them in basic reading and writing skills while also teaching specific skills such as sewing, carpentry, business accounting, and computer technology. The hope is that, once their education is complete, the girls will not have to return to the mines. In this particular instance, some girls did indeed complete their education, employing their newly developed skills to initiate their own businesses or obtain safer, more secure work. However, many of the girls did not complete their education, returning to the mines because they did not understand the purpose and value of their education. Of pivotal importance is that they could not see the value in their education because they did not recognize their own value.

7. Spirituality and values do not always occupy a prominent place in conversations about education, training, and technology for women and girls. However, while basic human needs remain unfulfilled for so many children, women, and men, it must no longer escape our attention that the failure to provide for all members of the human family is directly connected to humanity's collective erosion of values. This global demise in values directly impacts upon how we see ourselves, how we perceive others, and how we relate with those around us. If we truly want to achieve full participation by and access for women, then conversations about skill building, finance and project implementation cannot be the only conversations we have. It must include those values from now onwards.

8. Even now, Governments and other decision makers are realizing that there is an urgent need to involve social partners in discussions on training and skills development, if the desired changes are to become a reality. It is now clear that Governments can no longer be the sole voices on education and training. The more successful training systems are consistently underpinned by a strong social dialogue. Such a holistic approach teaches practical, hands-on skills, as well as empowering the individual to regain and recognize her or his dignity.

9. Empowerment does not come from the outside. Empowering is a process of understanding and connecting with one's core values and qualities, and learning how to use them. Empowerment is not simply a question of strengthening survival skills or externally redressing wrongs either. It involves inner growth and development whereby one's state of mind changes, since the greatest limitations we face are those we place on ourselves. Personal dignity is a state of being. It can never be fully taken away from an individual so long as she or he continues to maintain it internally. Dignity is a value that includes self-respect and respect for others. Dignity emerges from the intrinsic and innate virtues of peace, love, joy, purity, and truth, which are present within every human being.

10. Our deep realization of these spiritual attitudes is a powerful entry point in shifting the conversation about education and work. From working within the traditional constructs of teacher/student, employer/employee, job descriptions/wages, and roles/responsibilities, we move into the elevated framework of creative contribution, productive participation, and a working community characterized by

positive change and transformation from within the core of each of us. This realization and conscious awareness can afford each of us strength and hope, and can be a powerful tool to help overcome the indignities of unemployment, poverty and violence. On the basis of Government, family and community commitment to values, the previous lost opportunities and restricted access to fair, decent and safe work, can change to allow full participation by women and girls in education, training, and other programmes that will allow for sustainability and true change.